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# Recycling: The History of a Legacy

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# Recycling: The History of a Legacy

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— In the early 1970s, Illinois Wesleyan University joined thousands of college and universities across the United States in the fight against the deterioration of the environment – a movement that would continue to gain national attention for years to come.

The first Earth Day spurred environmental interest for innumerable Americans. Former Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, who aimed to infuse the energy of the anti-war movement into the environmental movement to increase public consciousness, brought environmental concerns to national attention. On April 22, 1970, 20 million Americans across the United States demonstrated for a healthy, sustainable environment.

Significant changes were also in effect for the people of Illinois with the 1970 ratification of the Illinois Constitution. This version, which is still upheld today, included Section 1 of Article XI, which declared, “The public policy of the State and the duty of each person is to provide and maintain a healthful environment for the benefit of this and future generations.” Section 2 of this article stated, “Each person has the right to a healthful environment.”

*The Argus* was quick to report on these state and national issues. Paul McVicker, Class of 1972 and writer for *The Argus*, reported, “Pollution is an international and a national problem. But it is also a local problem and every individual can contribute to its solution.”

McVicker described programs at Illinois Wesleyan, including faculty, student and community panel discussions about solutions to environmental problems, for which students and the community were encouraged to participate. At the forefront of these initiatives was Operation Recycle.

In 1970, Professor Derek McCracken joined a group of graduate and undergraduate students at Illinois State University to form the environmental group Enact. McCracken said that during one meeting, the group discussed the need for a recycling program in Bloomington-Normal. The group collected information to share with city council members along with reports about necessary equipment, the market for materials and overall logistics that would be needed for a recycling drive.

“Once we collected the information, we realized that we needed to hold a recycling drive, more as a demonstration than anything else. This way, other entities would see what was involved and be more likely to step up and take over,” said McCracken.

Operation Recycle volunteers in 1971.  
(Photo courtesy of Ecology Action Center, Tate Archives and Special Collections, The Ames Library)



To get the drive started, the group needed publicity in order to enlist volunteers. Enact turned to WJBC, the McLean County radio station with the highest share of available audience in the nation, according to radio host Don Munson.

“At any given time, WJBC could reach a huge percentage of the population of McLean County,” said Munson, who was referred to as “Mr. WJBC” by his faithful listeners.

Because of the influence of the radio station, McCracken said, “We met with Don Munson and others at the station to talk about how we could get the word out.”

But Enact wasn’t the only group with Earth Day in mind. “As it happens, the station was planning a community cleanup event. We realized that the two ideas were synergistic and during a meeting, the name Operation Recycle came about,” said McCracken.

With the birth of Operation Recycle came the first recycling drive in February of 1971, during which volunteers collected newspapers, cans and glass bottles. Drives were set up at multiple locations across the city, including one in the parking lot of the Eastland Mall and another in the Physical Plant lot at Illinois Wesleyan.

“From the start, we packed the bundles and sacks of newspaper in the trucks to make solid walls. As it turned out, that was the only way that we could have handled the multitude of newspaper that came in that first weekend,” said McCracken.

According to Munson, who helped at the Eastland Mall location, “Long lines of cars showed up, an overwhelming number of them. Recycling just made so much sense that people were awaiting an invitation to start doing it.

Smashed glass in a truck bed.

(Photo courtesy of Ecology Action Center Collection,  
Tate Archives and Special Collections, The Ames Library)



Anne McGowan, a Bloomington-Normal resident and instrumental volunteer, described the historic drive at the Illinois Wesleyan location in the parking lot of Physical Plant.

“We had big truck bodies for glass, which had to be separated by brown, green and clear. Then a volunteer would get in the truck body and smash the glass with tampers,” she said, “And everybody wanted to do that.”

The drive was incredibly effective, with 105 tons of paper and over 20 tons of glass collected over one weekend. “The drives were successful because of collaborative volunteer efforts,” said McGowan, “It was absolutely overwhelming.”

“For me, the first drive was an eye-opener,” said McCracken, “We could not have done it without deep community involvement.”

Munson agreed, “It so far exceeded our expectations that we scheduled another for a month later, then another.”

The drives led to increased environmental involvement within the community. In April of 1971, *The Argus* reported, “The fight against pollution must start with the individual first, and each of us can wage our own war.”

Along with Operation Recycle, Illinois Wesleyan students created ways to get involved through the Environmental Action Committee. In 1970, Student Senate appropriated \$160 to the group, a special committee of Intercollegiate Information and Programming. The team set up a symposium and a permanent program on environmental problems.

In an issue of *The Argus* printed March 2, 1973, Bob Gilfillan, Class of '76, reported the initiatives of another group on campus, the Student Volunteer Action Commission. These students planned for the expansion of the paper-recycling project at Illinois Wesleyan, which would include recycled bottles and cans.

The innovative efforts displayed by numerous groups and individuals in the Bloomington-Normal community proved to be of great value. “I saw Operation Recycle as the key that opened up a hidden secret: Bloomington-Normal and McLean County wanted to be able to recycle,” said McCracken.

From 1971 to 1982, Operation Recycle, under the direction of Myra Gordon, the program’s first full-time director, held recycling drives every four to seven weeks at three main Bloomington-Normal locations. Over the course of those years, Operation Recycle received over \$10,000 in profits from sales of recyclables donated through the drives.

“Our profits were always dedicated to nature projects within town,” said McGowan, the first director of the Ecology Action Center (EAC), an education and outreach program that grew out of Operation Recycle. Projects included tree planting in Miller Park and landscaping at the Normal Public Library.

In the early 1980s, Operation Recycle benefited the community in a new way when it became a full-time recycling center with employees. Community Action’s Carol Reitan, former mayor of Normal, offered Operation Recycle a state grant that made this full-time program possible. Today, it is one of the oldest, continually-running recycling centers in Illinois.

In 1995, the EAC opened as an educational center for the community.

The program, which started under the name “Operation Recycle” but was referred to by the community as the Ecology Action Center, continues to thrive today by providing the community with environmental and educational programs, events, workshops and classes.

The early Ecology Action Center.  
(Photo courtesy of Ecology Action Center,  
Tate Archives and Special Collections, The Ames  
Library)



"The evolution of Operation Recycle has astounded me," said McCracken, "We couldn't ask for a better legacy."

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